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Smell of fresh-cut wood replaces depository's dust, filth, odors

By GARY SHULTZ
Staff Writer

The Texas School Book Depository stands dingy and foreboding at the corner of Houston and Elm streets, imposing its uncomfortable presence on a neighborhood of common-looking office buildings and warehouses like a hobo at a wedding.

Strangers to the city seek the building out to touch it, photograph it, consider it and strain their nerves to detect the presence of evil.

If not for the destructive event of 16 years ago — the assassination of President John F. Kennedy — the building probably would have been torn down and replaced by an asphalt parking lot.

But in a city hungry for a sense of its own history, the seven-story brick edifice is being scooped from the shadows of embarrassment, dusted off and clothed with dignity.

By next summer, the building is scheduled to house county commis-

sioners' offices and meeting rooms and, in subsequent years, other county administrative offices.

The smell of fresh-cut wood is washing away the odor of old, old dust and filth that permeated the air there for so long.

And the sound of hammers and electric saws are replacing the eerie silence that had engulfed the building since Lee Harvey Oswald allegedly perched at a sixth-story window on Nov. 22, 1963, and fatally shot President Kennedy.

Rugged faced workmen with callused hands and earthy language serve as the harbingers of a rebirth granted the building when the voters in 1977 agreed to pay for its renovation with the passage of a bond election.

Some \$2.3 million is due to be spent renovating the first two floors of the 80-year-old building. Work on the remaining floors will have to be financed out of future bond elections, county officials say, although much of the work now being done will pave

the way for that eventual restoration effort.

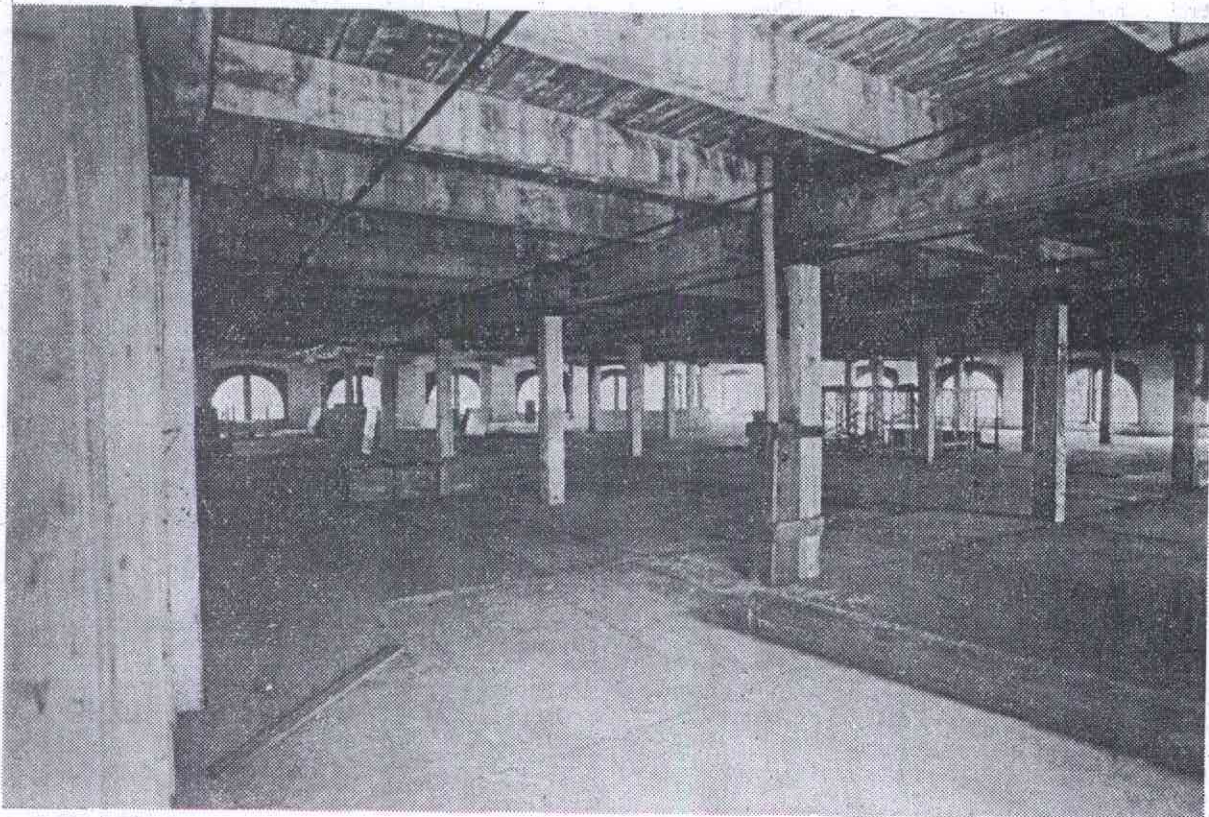
Cracks, holes and chips in the red bricks mark the passage of various tenants through the square structure, an undistinguished architectural effort designed for sturdiness rather than splendor.

White paint peels off the 16-inch-square fir columns and heavy beams supporting the floors. The heavy timbers emit a sense of long-sleeping strength, which John Shook Jr., county public works director, says will be awakened with careful sandblasting to expose the wood grains.

The building has been through the renovation process before.

It first was built in 1898 and housed the Southern Rock Island Plow Co. On May 4, 1901, it was struck by lightning and burned. But the existing building was rebuilt by the company on top of the old foundation. The bricks of the original building can be seen extending most of the way up the basement wall.

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— Staff photo by John Hall

Depository's sixth floor will house historical exhibit of the Kennedy assassination

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But above the activity on the first and second floors rests the sixth floor, a fateful place sealed off from the rest of the building by plywood walls.

To get to it, the curious go up a narrow stairwell full of musty odors and old paint.

In the seconds before peering through a crack in the walls, the blood pressure rises slightly, and the muscles tense in what is expected to be a look into the very face of evil.

But a disappointment quickly follows.

It is simply a warehouse floor, innocent looking in its nakedness.

It looks no more a part of the event that shattered a nation's dreams than the bricks in the street below. The notorious corner window is undistinguished in appearance from any other window in the building. And the three-quarter-inch plywood floor near it is peeling and buckling just like all the rest of the floors in the building.

It becomes obvious that evil cannot be defined geographically.

What to do with this floor has been the subject of a study paid for with a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities.

Shook and members of the county Historical Commission are concerned about how to treat the floor with dignity and accuracy without becoming ghoulish about the events that transpired there.

Although the study is not expected to be released for almost two weeks, it is expected to recommend restoring a section of the floor to its original appearance in 1963 and using the remainder of the floor for the display of artifacts and pictures dealing with the death of Kennedy.